

Unleashing the creativity of farmers

The editors

Farmers adapt their farming systems as conditions and needs change. They try out new ideas they have seen or heard about from other farmers, visitors or extension agents, put their own ideas into practice and sometimes work on innovations that have arisen “by accident”. Innovations often arise out of necessity, others are born of curiosity. An innovation can be a practical technique or a different way of organising things, like when a farmer makes new arrangements about how land should be used with a neighbouring farmer. With little or no support from outside – particularly if they live in areas where extension services are poor (p17) – farmers try to solve their problems by putting their trust in their own skills. For example, more than ten years ago, peasant farmers in Central America created the *Campesino a Campesino* (CaC) movement to develop a sustainable agriculture that would make optimal use of local resources by drawing on indigenous knowledge and values (p26). As many articles in this Newsletter show, farmer experimentation and innovation is deeply rooted in the daily struggles of small-scale farmers. Many innovations, especially those made by women, are hidden or isolated but there also can be close connections between them. These connections could be better used to stimulate a continuing process of innovation (p14). There can be serious constraints to farmer experimentation and innovation. Several articles stress that it is important that the community recognises local innovators. Women in particular often have difficulty in winning this recognition (p40).

Widening interest

Farmer innovation is not new, it has always been an essential part of agriculture. Drawing attention to the importance of farmer innovation is not new either. In recent years many books and articles have

appeared on local innovations in such magazines as the *ILEIA Newsletter*, *Honeybee* (p5), and *Enlace* (p28). Despite this, formal research and extension has paid little attention to farmer innovation. Now, the tide seems to be turning. Some development programmes have started to go beyond participatory research on techniques originating in formal science. They are deliberately using indigenous innovation as an entry point into joint experimentation to further develop “home grown” ideas. These initiatives involve local innovators, neighbouring farmers, development agents and sometimes even research scientists. International and national research and development organisations are now considering how farmer innovation can best be supported especially for development of ecologically sound agricultural and natural resource management practices suitable for diverse and specific sites (p35).

Seeking complementarities

Ways are being sought to trigger participatory innovation processes in which the knowledge and experiences of small-scale farmers and external advisors are combined in a “learning dialogue” (Hocdé et al., p28). Research scientists have important tasks to play, by bringing in information, methods and analyses which complement what farmers already know and can do themselves. The evaluation of the CaC movement in Nicaragua (p26) revealed that more systematic learning, rigorous comparison of options, and insights from outside are needed to make farmer experimentation more effective. As argued by Braun et al., (p33), seeking complementarity in methodologies could also enhance local innovation processes, e.g. the approach of experimental learning-by-doing (a strength of Farmer Field Schools) could be combined with systematic comparison (a strength of PTD) and with wider sharing (a strength of CaC).

Enthusiasm and ownership

Supporting farmer innovation involves a variety of interlocking activities, as dis-

cussed on page 9, 25 and 28. The articles from Latin America in particular stress the importance of “farmer promoters” in facilitating innovation. Farmer promoters help farmers realise that they are capable of recognising and offering solutions, doing experiments and communicating options to others. Promoters can help farmers bring out their ideas and guide them in designing their own experiments. The goal is to promote a culture of enquiry and experimentation among farmers which helps build enthusiasm, self-confidence, pride and hope for the future (p26). Magazines, video, radio, television, fairs, workshops and farmer congresses (pages 18, 28 and 39) have proved to be effective tools for identifying, sharing and analysing local innovations and for stimulating further experimentation. As Hocdé et al. (p28) observe, the important thing is that innovators do these things for themselves and take pride in them. In Costa Rica, innovating farmers took the initiative to found a committee of farmer experimenters and representatives from the public and NGO sector to support and plan participatory innovation development at regional level that put farmers’ organisations in charge of research (p28).

Re-orientation needed

The articles included in this Newsletter make it clear that there are two major pre-conditions for supporting farmer innovation. First, empowering farmers to take the lead in experimentation, communication and organisation; and second changing the attitudes and roles of researchers and development workers so that they recognise farmer innovators as equal partners, with experiences and skills different to their own. Only then can they facilitate processes of participatory innovation and provide the complementary inputs needed. Re-orientation is also needed in policy-making from the local to the international levels. The experiences of the CaC movement (p26) and in Tanzania and Ethiopia (p9, p23) show how vital it is to involve all stakeholder groups (farmer organisations, research and extension institutes, universities, development agencies, ministries, banks and the private sector) in platforms for dialogue. This should lead to change in policy relating to research, extension, education, land tenure, trade and many other factors that can stimulate or constrain farmer innovation.

The ultimate aim, as so aptly expressed by Braun & Hocdé (p33), is to stimulate social processes that unleash the creative skills of people and their organisations in order to create a permanent movement of innovation driven by the rural population. ■



Photo: Martin Wolf